



## What are You? What time is it? Where are you?

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In the cinematic finale of "*Peaceful Warrior*,<sup>1</sup>" a film released in the year 2006, we witness a striking visual metaphor. The protagonist actor, Dan, representing the book's author, is suspended upside down on gymnastic rings. As he hangs there, the voice of his mentor poses a series of Socratic questions. "Where are you Dan?" he asks. "Here," comes the reply. "What are you Dan?" to which Dan replies, "This moment." His mentor's final question asks, "What time is it?" "Now," asserts Dan.

This scene, might seem to border on the clichéd, does set the stage for an intriguing philosophical inquiry. Are you, dear reader, truly present in this moment as you peruse these words? Or is your mind, that relentless machine, churning away with its incessant background hum? The questions posed by the film - who are you, and how did you come to be this entity that you are at this very moment - are not merely rhetorical. They are the essence of our existential conundrum.

As we peel back the layers of this narrative, we are promised answers to these significant questions of life altering importance. At the beginning of our journey is Bruce Hood's book titled "*The Self Illusion*."<sup>2</sup> Hood, with a keen eye for the intricate tapestry of human experience, posits that our sense of self is not an innate fortress but a sandcastle,

shaped by the relentless waves of experience and environmental exposure. What you consider 'you,' is but a collage of these varied encounters.

Bruce Hood, armed with an arsenal of psychology, neuroscience, and cognitive research, presents a thesis that is both startling and perhaps, for the faint of heart, a tad unsettling. But let us not be too hasty in labeling it revolutionary.

Hood posits that our cherished sense of a consistent 'self' is nothing more than a grand illusion, a sort of cognitive mirage, cobbled together by the brain from a rich tapestry of sensory inputs and experiences. Our personalities, beliefs, and perceptions, he argues, are not the fixed stars in the firmament of our psyche as we might have romantically believed, but rather malleable entities, shaped and reshaped by the relentless potters' hands of our environment and social exchanges.

To the skeptic, this might reek of scientific overreach, sounding like the latest installment in an endless series of philosophical psychobabble like those that assault our senses daily. Before dismissing it as such, pause for a moment, and ask yourself: can you, devoid of resorting to the crutches of supernatural entities or the dogmas of blind faith - the unprovable and the unfathomable - offer a

better explanation of the self?

This is not merely an academic exercise. It is a challenge to the very core of how we perceive our existence. Hood's argument, if we dare to entertain it seriously, forces us to reassess our understanding of identity and consciousness. It invites us to consider the possibility that what we perceive as our unassailable 'self' might be as malleable and transient as the clouds that scud across the sky – shaped not just by our internal musings but by the vast and varied landscape of our external experiences.

This perspective is not just academic contemplation. It has profound implications for how we understand human nature and social dynamics. Just as Buddha's teachings compel us to see the self as transient and illusory, Hood's "The Self Illusion" challenges our traditional notions of individuality and selfhood. It suggests that what we perceive as our coherent, self-directed identity is, in fact, a complex, dynamic, and largely communal construct, not a fixed and intrinsic entity.

In this light, both the film "*Peaceful Warrior*" and Hood's book urge us to reconsider our understanding of the self – not as an unchanging monolith, but as a fluid, ever-evolving process, influenced by the myriad experiences of our lives. It's a call to embrace a more communal and dynamic view of selfhood, one that recognizes the profound impact of our environments and interactions in shaping who we are.

Some might consider that to venture into the rather treacherous waters of comparing Bruce Hood's suggestions in "*The Self Illusion*" with the ancient teachings of the Buddha, would be with a sense of cautious intrigue. Here we have, on one hand, a modern psychologist armed with the empirical weapons of science, and on the other, an ancient historical figure, whose insights have transcended time, largely unaided by the rigors of scientific method, until, perhaps now.

What strikes me most profoundly is the unexpected convergence of their thoughts on

the nature of the 'self.' Hood, with his scientific arsenal, deconstructs the self as an illusion, a mere byproduct of our brain's incessant need to make sense of the sensory inputs and social interactions that bombard it incessantly. Now, this is not an entirely novel idea in the realms of psychology and neuroscience, but it's the way Hood presents it – not as a nihilistic revelation but as a liberating truth – that resonates intriguingly with the teachings of Buddha.

Buddha, who lived in an era devoid of fMRI machines and neuroscientific studies, arrived at a similar conclusion through introspection and meditation. His concept of Anatta, or non-self, asserts that the self is not a permanent, unchanging entity but a transient, ever-fluctuating process. This is remarkably similar to Hood's view, albeit arrived at through vastly different methods.

Herein lies an unexpected validation of sorts. Hood's scientific approach, far from undermining the Buddha's teachings, actually lends them a new kind of legitimacy. It suggests that the insights arrived at through meditation and spiritual introspection are not merely fanciful or metaphysical musings, but could have concrete basis in the workings of the human mind.

For those who are critical of religious doctrines, need not sift the Buddha's teachings through this filter, for the Buddha's teachings are devoid of the elements that are usually attributed to faith-based religions. Nevertheless, one cannot discount this intersection between modern psychological science and the Buddha's teachings. It is rather fascinating. It's a rare and delightful instance where science and the philosophy of the Buddha, often seen as polar opposites, converge. It forces one, even skeptics, to acknowledge that ancient wisdom and modern science, despite their different paths, can sometimes arrive at startlingly similar destinations.

This confluence, I dare say, should not lead us to romanticize or mystify the Buddha's teachings, nor should it compel us to

dogmatically adhere to Hood's scientific perspectives. Rather, it should encourage a more nuanced understanding of the self – as a concept that transcends the boundaries of science and spirituality. It's a reminder that our quest for understanding the human condition is an ongoing journey, one that benefits from both the empirical rigor of science and the introspective depth of the teachings of the Buddha. That this convergence is happening more frequently in our modern age, ought to illicit in our own minds that the teachings of the Buddha do indeed have meaningful value for humankind.

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### *Non-Self*

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Indeed, it bears repeating, and with some emphasis, that in the teachings of the Buddha – a figure whose shadow looms large over millennia – the concept of 'self' is deftly encapsulated in the Pali term 'anatta.' This word, translating roughly to 'non-self,' posits a rather radical idea: in us humans, there exists no permanent, unchanging essence, no immutable core that we can call 'self.' What we perceive as our 'self,' according to Buddha, is but a fleeting aggregation of physical and mental phenomena, forever in a state of flux.

Now, let's juxtapose this 2500-year-old wisdom with Bruce Hood's contention. Hood, a man firmly ensconced in the empirical world of neuroscience, suggests that this 'self' of ours is a mere illusion, conjured up by the brain as it processes a barrage of sensory inputs and experiences. This mirrors the Buddha's 'anatta' remarkably well. Both views, whether cloaked in the vestments of the Buddha's teachings of anatta or the lab coat of science, converge on a startling truth: the 'self' is not a static entity but a fluid, ever-changing construct.

Let us delve deeper into Buddha's teachings, particularly the concept of 'anicca' or impermanence. Everything, he posited, is in a perpetual state of change. Hood's idea that our

personalities and beliefs are continuously molded by environmental and social factors echoes this ancient teaching beautifully. The implication is clear: nothing about the 'self' is set in stone.

Then we have the Buddha's concept of 'Dependent Origination,' a rather intricate idea suggesting that all phenomena are interconnected and arise in dependence on each other. Hood's theory that the self is a byproduct of our interactions with our environment and social context is in striking harmony with this. Both perspectives acknowledge that the self is not an isolated, self-sustaining entity but a product of a complex web of causes and conditions.

Lastly, let us consider Buddha's insight that suffering stems from an attachment to this notion of a permanent, unchanging 'self.' Hood's assertion that the self is an illusion resonates with the Buddha's call to relinquish our grip on ego and the fallacy of a permanent self. In doing so, both suggest, lies the path to mental awakening and a reduction in suffering.

In this light, both the ancient teachings of the Buddha and Hood's modern scientific musings offer a provocative invitation: to view the 'self' not as a fortress to be defended, but as a river, constantly flowing and reshaped by the terrain it traverses.

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### *Brain Patterns*

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In the vast, often bewildering expanse of human cognition, we are drawn, perhaps inexorably, to the concept of 'self' as a thing, not a process, and yet, a process is exactly what the self is. This, we gather, from the annals of scientific research, which tell us that the human brain is rather fond of patterns. It's an intriguing thought, isn't it? That the brain, this marvelous, squishy organ, ensconced in our skulls, finds solace in patterns, in the familiar and the repetitive. But let us not fall into the trap of assuming that these patterns, just

because they are recognizable and comfortable, are inherently good or beneficial.

Indeed, repetition in social patterns leads to consensus, and this is as true for our personal, repetitive patterns, as it is for anything else. We accept these patterns, not necessarily because they are virtuous or advantageous, but simply because they are familiar. They become the mental images we construct about ourselves, shaping our perception of who, what, and why we are what we think we are.

Not all of these repetitive patterns are malevolent, of course. In this arena, the dichotomy of good and bad falls away, leaving only what is beneficial or unbeneficial for one's life. And here, I'm not waxing philosophical about the moral implications of these terms. Rather, I'm pointing out the critical importance of understanding how our view of 'self' is created.

To truly discern whether these patterns are beneficial or not, we must engage in a thorough examination of the reasons behind our view of 'self.' It's a venture that requires us to step back and scrutinize the perceptions we hold about ourselves.

Perceptions, you see, are not immutable entities; they are not reliable barometers of reality.<sup>3</sup> They come into existence only when we become aware of something through our senses, which are inextricably linked to our environment and our experiences. How we interpret this sensory information shapes our interactions with the world. Human sensory perception involves both bottom-up and top-down processes – the former built from sensory input, the latter shaped by our knowledge, experiences, and thoughts.<sup>4</sup>

It's crucial to acknowledge that not everyone possesses the same knowledge, and thus, sensory input is not interpreted uniformly. Even among large groups sharing similar knowledge, interpretations can vary widely due to differences in immediate environments, including social, political, familial, religious, and cultural influences.

Thus, human perception is fluid, constantly in flux, never permanent.

When we encounter repetition in our interactions with the environment, the brain develops familiarity, even expectation. But this familiarity can be deceptive, leading us to erroneously believe that our perceptions are unassailable truths. We interpret our perceptions based on transient, impermanent sensory input. Perceptions, then, are fleeting occurrences, never static entities.

The lifespan of some perceptions is astonishingly brief – mere nanoseconds. Others, like the expectation of rain with heavy clouds, are formed through slower, repetitive experiences. Repetition also shapes our perceptions when we are bombarded with the same messages repeatedly, leading to sensory adaptation.<sup>5</sup> Over time, we become numb to the perceptions of our senses – the ticking of a clock, the noise near airports, the smell of cinnamon rolls. This cognitive or perceptual desensitization extends to all senses and can lead to increased tolerance in substance abuse, requiring more of the substance to achieve the same effect.

In the grand scheme of things, it's all too easy to attribute our suffering solely to perception. Yet, perception is not the sole architect of our woes, though it plays a significant role. It's not the intrinsic qualities of things, devoid of our interpretations, that are to blame. Rather, it's the convoluted maze of our own making, the self-constructed delusions, that often lead us astray. Perception, in this regard, becomes a formidable force, driving our thoughts and, all too often, leading us into the dark alleys of our minds where we craft our own suffering.

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### *Map of Your Life*

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Yet there's a silver lining: human intellect, ever malleable, offers the potential to discern the nature of our perceptions. This is not a task

for the idle-minded. One must possess a commitment to scrutinizing one's reactions to existing perceptions and confronting dearly held convictions. The pitfalls that ensnare us, more often than not, stem from a reactionary stance towards misguided interpretations of our world.

To argue this as only applicable to the tangible, would be simplistic. If you're truly attuned to the present discourse, you'd recognize that our internal musings and convictions can be as treacherous, if not more so, than external stimuli. Allow me to offer an illustrative example:

Over time, I've become privy to the world of a man imprisoned by his own misconceptions, all created from rigid beliefs. His psyche is ensconced in a fortress built from past betrayals by others reaching far back into his childhood years, and at present, culminating in a betrayal of himself. While he professes a penchant for solitude, I would venture to say that it's a mask. Solitude, in his mind, offers an illusion of mastery or control over his surroundings and fate. If he does not have to deal with other people, he can maintain an illusion that he is in control. However, this delusion proves to be as painful as an unfaithful lover.

What he believes about his "self" is that his love of, and penchant for, being alone, is actually a complete shutting down of his emotions. This aggravates, and indeed, I believe, is the condition behind the specter of alcoholism (cause), which haunts him daily (effect). To label alcoholism as the root of his woes would be missing the forest for the trees.

His true adversary is his lack of control—his own delusion that he can control the things that he knows cause him to suffer. Supporting this cycle of suffering are deeply ingrained beliefs and opinions. The grim irony is that while he clings to a self-narrative that says, "This is just who I am," he remains oblivious to the true origins (conditions) of his suffering (effect). Yet, he consistently returns to the same behavior, the same rationalization, the

same thinking without realizing these are not ever going to end his suffering. Supposedly it was Albert Einstein who said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, although this popular saying has never been proven to be attributed to Einstein.

In a display of hubris, he often makes a claim to his intelligence, similar to a veiled warning like the Gadsden Flag; "Don't Tread on Me." But to a discerning mind, it appears that he confuses intelligence with mere cunning and cleverness.

The difference between real intelligence and mere cleverness lies in depth, application, and character. Real intelligence encompasses a deep understanding and insightful application of knowledge, often with a focus on long-term and ethical implications. It involves critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and the ability to understand complex concepts. On the other hand, cleverness is more about quick-wittedness or shrewdness, often used to achieve short-term goals or to maneuver through situations with astute, sometimes superficial solutions. Cleverness can be a facet of intelligence but doesn't encompass its breadth or depth. Real intelligence is more holistic and concerned with understanding and wisdom, while cleverness is more tactical and immediate. Intelligence seeks understanding; cleverness, more often than not, seeks advantage.

His cognition, while appearing sharp at times, is highly selective, honed by his trust issues to filter through experiences, holding onto those experiences that closely align with his delusion of control. He, at present, is unable to recognize that behind the causes of his suffering is his persistent belief that he is, and must be, in control. His perception of control is not only incorrect, but this delusion is the "condition" which leads to his experiences (causes) of suffering (effect) in many, many different forms, day-in-and-day out.

His delusion of being in control extends deeply, affecting his ability to freely experience emotions that are centered on things that reveal who he really is, how he thinks, and why he believes the things he does. He treats his emotions like a prisoner, chained in a secluded cave, far from even his own examining thoughts.

In essence, he exhibits cognitive biases and emotional regulation issues, as understood in modern psychology. His selective cognition, sharpened by trust issues, suggests a confirmation bias,<sup>6</sup> where he acknowledges only experiences that align with his need for control. This fixation on control is a common cognitive distortion<sup>7</sup>, often leading to anxiety and a sense of helplessness when control is unattainable. Furthermore, his emotional experiences appear repressed, indicating a possible avoidance coping mechanism.<sup>8</sup> This detachment from emotions, while temporarily protective, often leads to long-term psychological distress, inhibiting genuine self-awareness and emotional growth. His belief in constant control and emotional suppression are defense mechanisms that might temporarily shield him from discomfort, but ultimately contribute to sustained psychological suffering and a poorer quality of life in the future.

In order to change the cause of his suffering, he will have to change his perception and his beliefs about this delusory control he believes he has, or “thinks” he can muster at any given moment, in order to protect his delusion.

The late writer and philosopher, Christopher Hitchens, addresses this man’s condition perfectly: *“The human condition, in all its splendor and tragedy, reminds us that the mind’s prisons are often of our own making. And like all prisons, they can be escaped, but only with the courage of introspection and the will to change.”*

Like the man in this story, you might be completely coherent about the things that you suffer. You might even understand that you are the cause of your own suffering. You might even be able to cite the reasons why you suffer,

whether they are true or not. The problem many people have is that they cannot identify the reason why. They might claim that they know the “why,” but what they actually describe is not the “why” (conditions), but the effects (suffering) that are associated with the cause (conditions + cause=effect).

Stressors of Life (condition)

Alcoholism (cause of)

Suffering (effects)

It is only the cause that creates the effect, the condition that creates the cause is a whole other arena. Alcoholism (cause) creates negative emotional and physical experiences (effects), but alcoholism alone does not identify or describe the conditions associated with the cause.

Many people, like the man in my example, are, metaphorically speaking, in ten kinds of pain, and don’t actually know what is going on inside of themselves. Again, like this man, who is locked into damage control, prevents any reasonable explanation for who they are or how they got to be the way that they are. Also, like the man in my example, people often live their lives as proverbial firefighters, constantly putting out fires with little rest in sight.

The man in my example is unable to stop his pain. He is well aware that there is a problem, but he can’t control the pain, the disappointment, the deep-seated hurt that somehow, he just wasn’t or isn’t enough. The signals just keep coming, but he can’t tell what they are, he just reacts by destroying his own life—one little bit at a time. The end result is that, on some level, he believes that he can never be enough for himself and that belief comes back to him in various forms of suffering.

Aside from introspection and the will to change, there must occur a moment of realization of one’s true condition. Recognizing the suffering (effect) alone is not enough to cause this change. As is the case with this man, his beliefs (conditions) have already caused him to recognize his suffering (effects).

However, he is rendered helpless by his belief that, "This is the way I have always been." His own belief, in this regard, represents the prison shackles that keep him a prisoner of suffering. The jail is the condition. The shackles are his attachment to the many causes (one being alcoholism), the effects are isolation, emotional detachment, and frustration (the effect).

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*You are Here, but Where is Here?*

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The title of this paper, "You are Here," beckons us to pinpoint our current location in this very moment. It alludes to the ubiquitous maps one encounters in vast complexes like shopping malls or bustling airports, often marked with conspicuous arrows or "X" marks denoting one's position relative to the surrounding expanse.

Now, picture this: a similar map, but one charting the terrain of your life. It could be an expansive wilderness, a teeming metropolis, an intricate airport terminal, or even an uncharted foreign land. Perhaps, in the relentless hustle and bustle of existence, you've lost sight of your place on this life map.

Despite the presence of a prominent red arrow indicating your position in life, you might still struggle to recognize precisely where "here" is. It's not uncommon for people to resort to distraction, immersing themselves in diversions as a defense mechanism against confronting their own realities. However, this approach is woefully inadequate when it comes to addressing the root causes of our suffering.

Individuality, too, often serves as a convenient excuse to shirk responsibility for our actions. Many of us tend to perceive ourselves as distinct entities, making choices we believe are in our best interest, all the while preserving our self-concept. Familiarity with this self-image offers a sense of comfort, and questioning it can be distressing. Could it be that we've misconstrued our own identities? Do we truly comprehend the path that led us

to become who we believe ourselves to be? The repetitive nature of our self-conception can lull our consciousness into complacency, leading us to take life's most vital aspects for granted.

When confronted with questions probing the reasons behind our existence and essence, we often find ourselves grasping for answers that, upon closer inspection, are somewhat detached from our intrinsic nature. Our responses tend to be a patchwork quilt, attributing our identities to external factors and experiences, shaping our self-perception.

Consider once more that metaphorical arrow indicating your current location. The space you occupy did not place you there; rather, you willingly entered it, or at least allowed yourself to be there. Similarly, the environments we've traversed in life haven't determined our mental and emotional positions, just as a mall or airport doesn't dictate your location on their maps. You, consciously or unconsciously, have positioned yourself where you are right now, in life, in self-concept, in identity.

However, acknowledging this responsibility can be challenging, especially if we're dissatisfied with our present circumstances or self-perception. It's human nature to strive to maintain a positive self-image. Consequently, we often lay blame on our upbringing, our current environment, or past experiences for shaping who we believe we are. Financial insecurity, for instance, is often attributed to the inadequacy of the income we receive from our job, instead of our poor money management.

Upon awakening each morning, our thoughts engage in a process of reorientation. We unconsciously sift through memories of the previous day, transitioning from an automated routine to a conscious contemplation of our plans or desires for the day. We may grapple with restlessness or find ourselves distracted from our to-do lists, seeking ways to amuse ourselves or escape the week's memories or our looming

responsibilities. But amid this mental whirlwind, are we truly present in the moment, or are we lost in a chaotic mélange of rapidly evolving thoughts and ideas?

Consider the genesis of our morning thoughts. Does our brain craft them randomly, or are they guided by a set of values we've cultivated through our accumulated perceptions? It is the mind, similar to a software program, that governs the actions executed by the brain, much like a computer following a set of instructions. We retain the values that serve us well while endeavoring to eliminate or evade those we find disagreeable. Our repetitive perceptions shape these values, which, in turn, mold our minds and beliefs, ultimately crafting our perspective of "I," and "me."

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### *I and Me*

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In scrutinizing our thoughts, regardless of the circumstances or surroundings, we inevitably encounter the constructs of "I," and "me." These concepts of self have been meticulously crafted over time, shaping us into the amalgamation of our mental identities. When we rouse from slumber in the morning, we rarely question the nature of our identity; we are so deeply tethered to the boundaries we think is "I," and "me."

In this routine, after awakening, there comes a period where we unconsciously slip into autopilot mode. Think of the space of time when we do the zombie walk to the coffee pot, not really thinking of much else but getting that piping hot cup of coffee into us. We readily adhere to the definition of "I," and "me" that we have unconsciously adopted, experiencing our self much as it existed the day before, the week before, or the years before. However, this notion of self is illusory, similar in nature to catching an echo of a sound from the past.

As previously mentioned, challenging the cozy and familiar notions of self, or the notion that self may be illusory, can be unsettling. One might ponder, "I am content with who I am; why disrupt the equilibrium or rock the boat?" Regrettably, many individuals traverse their entire lives without ever truly awakening, without ever drawing close to an understanding of their authentic essence. "I," and "me," are nothing more than a hodgepodge fusion of sensations, emotions, and reactions stored in our brains.

Occasionally, we find ourselves wondering, "Where did the day go? It feels as though I woke up only a few hours ago. This week passed in a blur, from Monday to Friday." Such temporal or spatial voids occur because we fail to attend to our own actions, movements and thoughts. We hurry through time, one distraction after another, until we pause, at which point we struggle to account for how we've expended our time. As individuals age, they often ponder where all the time has vanished, reminiscing about past events without truly connecting with them. Their lives become a mere sequence of memories. It is a curious revelation that time itself remains unchanged; it is we who navigate through its currents. Time is immutable, while humans determine how it is utilized.

Contemplating the reasons behind one's identity and self-perception should not disrupt one's present life or breed self-doubt. If it does, then there's a misunderstanding of the process. The examination of self doesn't entail subjecting oneself to relentless doubt or extreme thinking. Rather, it's a relaxed endeavor, accomplished by cultivating awareness of one's thoughts and attentiveness to the actions that bolster one's ideas of self. In essence, the "who," representing what one believes oneself to be, becomes evident through deliberate focus and scrutiny of the thought processes that support the notions of "me," and "I."

In the cradle of human curiosity, our questions are the first to cry out, announcing the contours of our ignorance and the shape of our innermost yearnings. To the Buddha, a question was not merely a quest for an answer, but a tool for unraveling the tightly coiled, knotted ball of string we call the self. It is with the scalpel of inquiry that the Buddha's teachings dissect the illusion of the ego, peeling back the layers of 'I,' and 'me,' revealing the impermanent and interconnected nature of our own existence.

The questions we ask are indeed a mirror reflecting the fragmented self we believe to be whole. In the pursuit of self-knowledge, our inquiries often betray our attachments, desires, and aversions—the very chains that the Buddha's teachings seek to break. When we ask with the intent to affirm our preconceptions, we are not unlike Narcissus, bewitched by his own reflection in the pool, mistaking our reflection for reality. But when our questions arise from a place of genuine not-knowing, they become a raft, as the Buddha might say, carrying us across the river of ignorance and suffering, to the farther shore of insight and understanding.

Yet, approximately 100 years before Socrates, the Buddha recognized that the right question could be more illuminating than a thousand answers. He admonished his followers to question even his own teachings with the thoroughness of a goldsmith testing the purity of his metal. It is in this spirit that we must understand the validity of our questions as self-revelatory.

However, let us not fall into the trap of solipsism, mistaking the map of our questions for the territory they seek to explore. The teachings of the Buddha are a guide, urging us not to become enamored with the questions themselves, but to use the questions as instruments to cut through the dense jungle of

delusion, created most often by our own ignorance. It's only when we are willing to question the questioner, when the arrow of inquiry turns inward, that we are able to begin to approach the truth that the Buddha pointed towards.

The validity of our questions as a reflection of our inner state is a concept well-grounded in the teachings of the Buddha. Knowing the right questions to ask invites us to a relentless examination of not only the world around us, but more importantly, the assumptions and beliefs that define our inner world. To question is to embark on a journey of self-discovery, one that has the potential to liberate us from the very notion of self that we so doggedly question. And in this grand paradox lies the beauty of the Buddha's path to awakening.

When we question, we're trying to understand something better, much like using a map to navigate an unknown land. However, we should be careful not to get so caught up in the questions themselves, or the map, that we forget about the actual understanding, or the importance of knowing the territory that we are trying to navigate.

Expanding on this, it's easy to become overly focused on the process of questioning, to the point where the questioning itself becomes more important than the answers we are trying to discover. It's like planning a journey so meticulously that we become obsessed with the details of the plan, the routes, the schedules, the maps, all the while losing sight of the real purpose of the journey, which is to experience the destination itself.

These avenues of focus are, unfortunately, inherent in how Western Buddhists practice. Often times they follow the teachings of a celebrity monk or nun so meticulously that they become obsessed with the teacher's doctrine rather than the message behind them. They schedule Buddhism into their lives, like a task to bolster their sense of being spiritual. They lose sight of the core knowledge,

importance and application of the Buddha's teachings.

In our search for self-understanding, especially within the context of Buddha's teachings, the questions we ask are truly meant to be tools. They should help us peel away the layers of our ego and the illusions we hold about ourselves and the world. But if we become too attached to these intellectual exercises, our personal growth can stall. We can end up analyzing the questions endlessly without actually experiencing the deeper truths and insights that where the questions are supposed to lead us.

So, in essence, it's important to use questions as a means to an end, not an end in themselves. The validity of a question is not in its complexity or how well it's crafted, but in how it moves us closer to genuine understanding and mental awakening.

Our questions are deeply revealing, serving as a window into how we perceive ourselves, which is often obscured by a relentless barrage of thoughts and external stimuli. The questions we choose to entertain speak volumes about our perceived identity and the inner narrative we've spun—much like the Buddha's insight into the questions as tools for slicing through the veil of 'self'. Questions like, "Why does this always happen to me?" often stem from a place of victimhood and imply a static, unchanging view of the self, a concept at odds with the Buddha's teachings of impermanence and non-self.

Solipsism is a philosophical concept that, at its core, posits that only one's own mind is sure to exist. Derived from the Latin words "solus," which means "alone," and "ipse," which means "self," solipsism holds that knowledge outside one's own mind is uncertain; the external world and other minds cannot be known and might not exist outside the mind. In other words, solipsism means that we believe that only our own perspectives, thoughts, and perceptions are true, and everyone else's is false. The meaning of solipsism is encased in the statement, "I'm

right, the world is wrong." Solipsism raises significant questions about the nature of reality, perception, and understanding, and is often discussed in relation to other philosophical topics, such as the problem of other minds, the nature of truth, and the reliability of sense perceptions. It's easy to become ensnared in the solipsistic trap, mistaking the map of our questions for the territory of truth.

Our questions can become another layer of the 'useless trash' we hold in our minds, trash that clutters our minds with noise that drowns out the silence necessary for true insight. We habitually gather information from outside sources, attempting to fit it into the narrative of our lives, often without considering whether this information aids us in our understanding or simply adds to the cacophony that already fills our heads.

Indeed, the quest for self-awareness is cluttered with thoughts and beliefs that masquerade as truth. This underscores that thoughts alone are not indicative of reality; simply because we think something doesn't grant it truth or relevance. It's an echo of the Buddha's caution against attachment to any doctrine, way of thinking or viewpoint, including the view of self.

Thus, we come to understand that asking the right questions, a practice encouraged by both the teachings of the Buddha and the critical mindset exemplified earlier by Bruce Hood, is not just about seeking answers, but about discerning which questions are worth asking. It's about understanding that our thoughts, and the questions that arise from them, are not the totality of who we are. They are but flotsam on the surface of a deeper current.

In summary, the art of questioning is about more than just seeking knowledge, it's a transformative practice that, when done sincerely, can lead to the eradication of suffering and the attainment of happiness. By carefully selecting our questions and disposing of the 'trash' that does not serve our deeper understanding, we embark on a journey not

just of intellectual discovery, but of profound personal growth. It is a journey inward, where, away from the noise and haste of external input, we might find the silence in which truth resonates.

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*Fear of What's Inside*

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It is a prevailing observation that many individuals, like the man described under the heading “Map of Your Life,” harbor a deep-seated fear of introspection, apprehensive of the revelations that might surface if they were to scrutinize their own thoughts. Consequently, the fundamental questions are evaded, opting instead to skirt conscious experience of the present moment through an array of distracting diversions. We continue along the ribbon of time with the conviction that attaining our desires will yield happiness, believing that sheer determination will mold reality to our whims. However, the harsh truth often confronts us, as heartbreak and frustration ensue, when we realize our limited control over the world.

In truth, most people cling fervently to their entrenched beliefs and self-concepts, wrestling with an innate dread of inevitable uncertainty, the prospect of shedding something they merely assume to possess—their self-image. Dismissing this notion of “self” indeed falls within the realm of confronting the inevitable unknown.

In a conversation with the Buddha, a curious individual did not seek answers about “who” the Buddha was, but rather pondered “what” he represented. The inquirer probed whether the Buddha was a deity, a saint, or some other entity. The Buddha's response, straightforward and profound, was a simple declaration: “I am awake.” This might compel you to contemplate the possibility that the person you perceive yourself to be is the very identity you must relinquish to attain genuine awakening, to become truly aware.

Pose this question to yourself: “*Who would I be without the persona I've constructed?*” Or, “*Who would I be without the person I think or believe I am?*” Does such an “other” person exist? Confronting the realization that you aren't who or what you assumed can appear daunting. Yet, this state of not knowing is precisely where the odyssey commences—a pristine canvas. Not knowing signifies that you've embarked on the path of discarding the accumulated mental clutter about your identity and seeking answers from within. It's an opportunity to fully immerse yourself in the present moment, to become one with it, and to recognize that every moment bears profound insights into your intrinsic, authentic nature and the nature of reality.

Nonetheless, there's a pivotal caveat that accompanies this journey: Never succumb to the delusion that your newfound knowledge elevates you above others. Wisdom does not render us superior to our fellow humans. While we may be better equipped to fathom who and what we are, we should never perceive ourselves as elevated beyond others. The entirety of humanity shares the same emotional and experiential tapestry, and we must eschew any notion of superiority.

The process of examining and reshaping one's mind, of expunging mental detritus, is a time-consuming endeavor. It has taken me a lifetime to unshackle myself from my false identities in order to free my mind. There are still remains of accumulated trash lurking in the corners of my thinking.

How does one embark on such a journey? I'd contend that it commences when you grasp the concept that there's no true starting point, for there's no real end; there's only the act of doing. And from this ongoing “doing,” wisdom invariably sprouts.

Unquestionably, I had to navigate to a mental state — a space - where I could comfortably embrace uncertainty, where I could accept the realization that I exert control only over the present moment. Even then, I occasionally allowed the ephemeral nature of the moment to slip through my fingers.

Initially, cultivating comfort with uncertainty and the acknowledgment of my lack of control, left me feeling vulnerable, though I couldn't initially pinpoint the source of that vulnerability. Embracing the notion that nothing remains static necessitates becoming at ease with vulnerability. Eventually, I discovered that the more I permitted myself to be vulnerable in the face of uncertainty, the more awake and aware I became. As my awareness heightened, I found solace in the moment, savored joy, happiness, contentment, and peace of mind as they unfolded. I learned to appreciate these experiences as they transpired, not as mere retrospectives, memories, or diary entries.

Let me underscore that none of this implies we should forsake our dreams, which are the hopes we have of better life experiences – a better life with less suffering. Dreams serve as the crucible of creation and self-evolution. However, in the realm of awakening and awareness, we scrutinize the intentions fueling our aspirations. If these intentions stem from selfishness or unhealthy thinking, we will inevitably reap what we sow, whether our dreams materialize or not.

The Buddha's metaphor of the raft and the river carries a profound lesson. Once we've constructed the raft and used it to traverse the river, there's no rationale for carting it along unless we intend to retrace our steps. Liberating ourselves from the mental baggage hindering self-discovery doesn't entail returning to our starting point. Remarkably, the journey toward awareness and wisdom irrevocably alters us; we can never revert to our former selves. The essence of the Buddha's teaching lies in the journey itself, not the destination. What this means exactly is that we *become* the destination – the destination is already there. We don't make or create the destination, we "*are*" the destination. When we attentively engage with and embrace the journey, the destination assumes a lesser role, for upon arrival, we have transformed beyond recognition. If these ideas provoke fear, sadness, or discomfort, it's likely because you

still cling to a mindset that envisions a future hewn from your past.

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### Words

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What exactly are words? Do we ever pause to contemplate the role words play in shaping our lives, or do we remain perpetually insensate to their significance? Have you ever considered the essence and purpose of the words you employ? Our journey into the world commences with the assignment of a name by our parents. During the initial years, our first name holds paramount importance. It isn't until we embark on our educational odyssey that our last name, our surname, gains prominence. In later years, we may grow curious about the origin and meaning of our surname, or delve into the ancestral lineage it represents. However, from the moment we learn of our first name's existence, the seeds of the concept of "I," and "me" begin to sprout. Our first name bestows upon us a sense of uniqueness and individuality, setting us apart from those without our name. The discovery that others share our first name, typically encountered in the school environment, often piques our curiosity.

Can we truly place our confidence in words as effective or accurate conveyors of reality? To do so would necessitate the innate ability to apprehend reality in its unadulterated form.

Throughout our lives, we accumulate labels that we believe in some way define us. This process of identity formation intensifies over time, evolving into a complex and intricate tapestry of labels. We adopt certain labels that we deem emblematic of our beliefs, values, and principles. This labeling extends to encompass the foods we savor, the garments we don, the hairstyles we sport, our age, race, nationality, and an infinite array of other labels. Words themselves are labels; definitions of words are labels. Yet, words invariably fall

short in one critical aspect. Words fail to encapsulate the essence of experience. Experiences elude the grasp of words, no matter how eloquent or sophisticated. Words can never truly encapsulate reality the way direct experience can.


Many years ago, while standing on the deck of a deep-sea fishing vessel approximately 65 miles off the Eastern seaboard of the Atlantic Ocean, within the expanse known as Georges Bank, I bore witness to the majestic sight of an adult Blue Whale emerging from the depths. Its colossal size and the vast expanse of its tail fin left me in profound awe. Regardless of the words I could muster, none could encapsulate that experience. Words were superfluous in that moment, as the experience transcended the need for interpretation. Gazing upon that whale compelled me to be wholly present in the moment. The memory etched by that encounter will endure for as long as I possess consciousness. The crux of the matter is that any words I might employ to articulate the experience would remain mere symbols attempting to convey its essence. And, in essence, isn't that precisely the nature of words—symbols?


I posit that the ancient Egyptians recognized this inherent quality of words, which led to the development of their hieroglyphic writing system. Hieroglyphs surpass mere pictorial representations; each hieroglyph symbolizes a sound. In essence, a hieroglyph corresponds to a concept within the observer's mind, linked to a specific sound. These symbols, referred to by modern linguists as phonograms, transcend mere visual depiction. Hieroglyphs were deliberately chosen not only for their capacity to represent the image but also for their phonetic value. Consequently, the ancient Egyptians crafted a language rife with profound symbolic meaning, imbuing images with layers of significance and rendering it a profoundly symbolic mode of expression.

For example, if one were unfamiliar with the word "belief," but comprehended its meaning, they could discern the concept conveyed by the following symbols:



These images mirror the operation of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. Concepts found visual representation in these symbols, which, in turn, conveyed sounds. The symbols themselves bore no direct connection to the word "belief," instead, they transmitted sounds through visual means. Here are a couple of notable examples from ancient Middle Egyptian hieroglyphs:

 = Water (mw [myr])

 = Cat (miw [mew])

Even without prior knowledge of the words for "water" or "cat," these symbols communicate the sounds associated with the depicted objects. In this case, both the symbol and the sound they represent align. The undulating lines resemble water, and the cat's image closely resembles a feline. To the ancient Egyptians who spoke the language, these symbols would evoke the corresponding sounds.

However, the English language deviates from this pattern. English words derive their meaning from other words, creating a circular linguistic construct. Sounds directly correspond to the letters forming the word. Words like "bee" or "leaf" bear specific meanings defined by conventional usage and universal consensus. Nevertheless, we cannot

rely entirely on words to provide comprehensive explanations of experience or reality. As previously emphasized, reality can only be lived and felt, not encapsulated within words.

When we attempt to describe experiences, frustration often sets in as we sense the inadequacy of words to capture our lived moments. In moments of exasperation, we may resort to the phrase, "*Well, you had to be there.*" This frustration emerges because words and language tend to be restrictive and isolating. Words relegate even the simplest of things to mere labels. Take, for instance, the sight of an apple. Our prior knowledge, convention, and the consensus of English speakers confirm it as an apple. In our attempt to describe it, we use additional words to specify its type. We strive to isolate and narrow down the apple's characteristics through descriptive terms such as "green," which might lead us to deduce it's a Granny Smith apple.

However, the full reality of the apple remains elusive until we sink our teeth into it, allowing our senses to impart the genuine "experience" of the apple. We realize it is "sweet," thereby confirming it as a Granny Smith apple. Yet, even in our endeavor to describe our experience of the apple, we must resort to more words like "sweet," "crisp," "tart," and so on.

The true reality perceived through our senses transcends the confines of words. When we treat words as infallible and assume they represent absolute reality, we detach ourselves from the genuine experience. Acknowledging that words fall short in encapsulating reality aligns us more closely with the present moment. By recognizing that the experience takes precedence over the words we employ, we become one with the moment. Words serve merely as symbols of symbols and sounds of life; they neither create or bestow life or experience.

This doesn't imply that words serve no purpose or hold no value. Words can guide us, inspire ideas, convey concepts, stimulate

thought and reason. Consider the wisdom conveyed in Lao Tzu's words:

*"The way to do is to be."*

The Buddha understood the inherent limitations of words and how they could never truly convey experience, but merely describe it from one's perspective. As noted earlier, these perspectives derive from individual perceptions, which, given their unreliability, remain inherently subjective. Any description of an experience invariably emanates from someone else's perception. Without firsthand acquaintance with the experience, we are left with but a description colored by the perspective of another, influenced by numerous factors we may neither be aware of nor have encountered.

In a sense, words captivate, enchant, and deceive us into believing they encompass reality. When we succumb to the spell of words and attempt to live according to their meanings, frustration arises when words fail to align with reality—the experience. This frustration stems from the erroneous belief that words, because they possess specific meanings, create an illusion of certainty, security, and fulfillment. We delude ourselves into thinking we can grasp the meaning of reality with certainty. Yet, reality can only be experienced; it defies encapsulation within words.

This exposition may evoke feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. Such reactions are entirely natural. As we begin to discern the distinction between reality—the tangible world—and the realm of words, perceptions, and perspectives, we may experience a growing sense of our own ignorance. This sensation is a typical response when we embark on the journey to dismantle old habits of thought and acceptance. It signifies that we are commencing the process of wiping away our own ignorance concerning the truth about our own intrinsic nature and the nature of reality. Life is not defined by words; it flows as a great stream of experience.

One might easily be seduced into the notion that the 'Great Stream' I am referring to is but a poetic euphemism for the collective unspooling of human consciousness, a term befitting perhaps a chapter of Hermann Hesse or a contemplative stanza of T.S. Eliot. And yet, it would not be entirely misplaced to apply this moniker to the broader and evermore intricate tapestry of human experience. For it is in the depth and breadth of this Stream where consciousness and reality intermingle, where the subjectivity of our perception dances with the objective scaffolding of the world.

Indeed, consciousness is something that can only be apprehended through experience. It is a rather extravagant mystery, isn't it, that one must be awake to ponder the nature of wakefulness? That one must exist to contemplate existence? The human condition is such that our sensory and cognitive faculties are the only lenses through which we can view the spectacle of reality. Thus, how we experience consciousness—and indeed, reality itself—becomes a matter of paramount importance. It begs the question, to what extent are we truly aware of the lenses through which we peer? Are we the impartial spectators we fancy ourselves to be, or are we swayed by the very act of observation?

In the realm of inquiry into the nature of consciousness and reality, there lies a subtle yet profound quandary: the degree to which our perception is colored by the very mechanisms that allow us to perceive. When I speak of lenses, I'm not referencing the mere physical organs of sight, but the entire cognitive apparatus that interprets and makes sense of the world around us. This apparatus is not a passive conduit for raw data; rather, it is an active participant in the formation of our reality.

Consider the observer, ensconced in the belief of objectivity, a detached entity appraising the world with dispassionate rationality. Yet, the act of observing is itself a dynamic interaction—every glance, every scrutinized detail, alters the state of what is being observed. The observer's preconceptions, biases, and internal narratives intertwine with their perceptions, tainting the so-called objectivity. Thus, to "beg the question," is to wonder how much of what we see is the world as it is, versus the world as we think it is.

The notion that we might be "swayed by the very act of observation" alludes to a concept well-articulated in the principles of quantum mechanics, where the observer effect suggests that the mere act of watching can alter the observed reality. On a more human scale, it speaks to our psychological and philosophical limitations. Our thoughts, experiences, cultural backgrounds, and emotions are all filters through which we interpret the flow of information. They shape our attention, mold our understanding, and ultimately construct the version of reality we accept as true.

Hence, the pursuit of understanding consciousness and reality is similar to peering into a hall of mirrors, where each reflection is distorted by the curves and angles of the glass—our individual and collective minds. The quest for impartiality is a noble one, but it may be as elusive as the horizon that retreats as we advance. In recognizing the fallibility and subjectivity of our own cognition, we can attempt to account for our biases, strive for a wider perspective, and perhaps approach a more nuanced understanding of the Great Stream of experience that encompasses us all.

A theory, posited by modern scientists—that consciousness may be like a field of energy, much like electromagnetism or gravity—is a tantalizing one. It suggests that our brains are not the originators of consciousness but rather sophisticated receivers, tuned to the frequencies of a vast and universal consciousness field. If our gray

matter operates similarly to a radio, picking up signals from an unseen broadcaster, then the implications are as profound as they are dizzying. The animal kingdom, with its panoply of varied brain architectures, might indeed experience this field in a manner alien to us, or perhaps not at all.

The limits of our understanding are, in this context, as critical as the grasp we presume to have on consciousness. Our neurological equipment, no matter how advanced, may still be woefully inadequate for the task of full comprehension. It is the height of hubris to assume that our experience of consciousness and reality is the pinnacle of what can be experienced. What, then, are we missing? What nuances, what colors, what music of the universe remains undetected because we lack the biological apparatus to tune in?

It is within this Great Stream of experience that our journey toward understanding must wade through. We must be willing to acknowledge that our perception of reality is both colored and limited by the very tools we use to perceive it. And so, we find ourselves in an intriguing paradox—the only way to study consciousness is with consciousness itself, a reflective loop that is as confounding as it is inevitable. The quest to understand our experience of consciousness and reality is not merely an academic exercise, but a pursuit that may well define the very essence of what it means to be human.

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### *Authenticity and Identity*

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There appears to be a growing movement within the psychology community that is geared to the focus on individual authenticity.<sup>9</sup> While this of course, is not a new idea, it is being revisited with the focus on the current population of adolescent, teenage and young adults, addressing the influence of technology.

Based on my own research in this arena, coupled with my knowledge and understanding of the Buddha's teachings, I believe there are some inherent flaws in the perspective of psychology's idea of "authenticity" and "identity." In some respects, the concept of "authenticity" or "authentic identity," is merely plying another conceptual label into the already overburdened concept of identity. Do we really need another identity label? With today's plethora of hedonistic malleable identities, I contend that perhaps we are pushing the boundaries of what we think the "self" means, because the ability to experience and understand reality is so desperately desired.

Does this mean that we are experiencing the loss of a shared social reality? Hm, well, if you have gleaned anything from the previous discussion, such a phrase as "shared reality" should sound suspect. There is no such thing as "shared reality." As pithy sounding as such a phrase may seem, it is merely a conceptual label that is only theoretical at best.

But, let's take a look at the word "authentic." The etymological history and development of the English meaning of the word reaches back into the 1300s (14<sup>th</sup> Century).

From the 1700s up to this day, the meaning of the word "authentic" is: *"Implies that the contents of the thing in question correspond to the facts and are not fictitious (hence "trustworthy, reliable").* And, although there is no Pali equivalent to this English word, another word was commonly used by the Buddha. This word is *sacca*. The Pali word "sacca" can be broken down into syllables as "sac-ca." Let's look at the meaning of these syllables:

1. **"Sac"**: This part of the word is related to the concept of truth or reality. The Sanskrit equivalent word is "sat", which means "true," "real," or "existing." The root "sat" is common in many Indo-European languages and is associated with the idea of being, existence, or truth.

2. **"Ca"**: In Pali, this is often just a phonetic component and doesn't carry separate meaning on its own. It's more of a linguistic element that forms part of the word but doesn't contribute to the meaning in the way the first syllable does. So, in the word "sacca," the primary meaning is embedded in the first syllable "sac/sat," denoting truth, reality, or existence. The word as a whole is significant in the Buddha's teachings and is used to refer to fundamental truths, particularly the Four Noble Truths (cattāri sacca-ni) which are central to his teachings.

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### *Authentic Identity?*

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The concept of "authentic identity" in psychology is closely linked to the idea of authenticity, which refers to the degree to which an individual's actions, beliefs, and values align with their true self or core identity. Authenticity is often considered a critical aspect of psychological well-being and personal fulfillment. "Authentic identity" typically involves:

- **Self-awareness**: Understanding one's own values, beliefs, and emotions.
- **Unbiased processing**: Objectively analyzing personal strengths and weaknesses.
- **Behavior-Value Congruence**: Acting in ways that are consistent with one's values and beliefs.
- **Relational Transparency**: Being honest and open in relationships.

Research in this area has expanded over the years, with several seminal works exploring the concept of authenticity and its impact on mental health and well-being. Some notable studies and theories include:

- **Rogers' Theory of Self**: Carl Rogers, a prominent humanistic psychologist, emphasized the importance of the 'real self' and 'ideal self' in personal development. His works highlight the need for authenticity for psychological health.
- **Existentialist Perspectives**: Philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger influenced psychological understandings of authenticity, focusing on the importance of personal choice and responsibility in creating an authentic life.
- **Positive Psychology Research**: This field, led by researchers like Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, often explores how authenticity contributes to happiness and fulfillment.<sup>10</sup>

It seems to me that the psychological concept of "authentic identity" or "authenticity" is focused on a person's perception of self. From the perspective of the Buddha's teachings, there is no solid identifiable self. Supposing that the Buddha's teachings of anatta are correct, wouldn't being authentic be quite relative to an individual's frame of mind? Meaning, a person can rightfully be "authentically" bad or "authentically" good. Therefore, my thinking is that being "authentic," in terms of the psychological movement toward "authenticity," is wholly subjective.

This analysis raises a profound question about the concept of "authenticity" in the context of the Buddha's teachings and philosophy, particularly the doctrine of Anatta (no-self). Let's break down the ideas involved in this question.

People are social creatures, and their identities are shaped significantly by their interactions with others and their cultural contexts. This interplay between the individual and their environment complicates the notion of authenticity. Can one be truly authentic if

their self-concept is so deeply influenced by external factors?

There's also the question of whether being authentic is always beneficial. Being true to oneself in a way that disregards social norms or hurts others might be considered "authentic," but not necessarily positive or adaptive. Conversely, adapting one's behavior to fit into social contexts can be seen as inauthentic, yet it is often necessary for social functioning and psychological well-being.

The Western concept of authenticity, which stems from Western psychological and philosophical traditions, "authenticity" refers to the degree to which one is true to one's own personality, spirit, or character, despite external pressures. It implies a self that is knowable, consistent, and has a core identity.

Juxtaposed to the Western concepts, the Buddha's teaching of Anatta, often translated as "no-self," challenges the existence of a permanent, unchanging self. Instead, it posits that what we consider 'self' is a collection of changing phenomena, including physical form, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

If we apply the Buddha's philosophical concept of Anatta to the idea of authenticity, it suggests that authenticity cannot be a fixed state or a true representation of an unchanging self, as there is no such permanent self to begin with. Authenticity, in this light, becomes a fluid and ever-changing concept, deeply subjective and relative to one's current state of mind and experiences.

Does this not also pose moral implications? Could it be said that a person can be "authentically" good or bad? Saying a person can be "authentically" bad or good is an interesting point. In the Buddha's philosophy, ethical and moral behaviors are often guided by principles stemming from one's own actions (kamma/karma) and the Eightfold Path, rather than a pursuit of authenticity. However, if we were to consider authenticity in this context, it would mean aligning one's actions with their current state of mind and understanding. This

alignment could indeed manifest in ways that are conventionally seen as 'good' or 'bad.'

Considering the teachings of the Buddha, the subject of "authenticity," by default, must include mindfulness. In the Buddha's teachings, mindfulness and awareness are key. A person who is mindful and aware of their transient nature might be considered 'authentic' in the sense that they are in tune with the impermanent and interdependent nature of their existence. This understanding could lead to actions that are 'authentic' to their current state of understanding and experience.

Applying the concept of Anatta to the idea of authenticity does suggest that authenticity, from the psychological perspective, is a subjective and fluid concept. It aligns more with a person's current understanding and experience rather than a fixed core identity. This perspective significantly differs from traditional Western views of authenticity but offers a unique way to understand the self and its expression in the world.

Further exploration of this conundrum looks at the concept of "authentic identity" in psychology, which is closely linked to the idea of authenticity, which refers to the degree to which an individual's actions, beliefs, and values align with their true self or core identity. However, what is the "true self?" The Buddha taught that there is no "self" in the same respect as modern psychology considers the self to be. Is there such a thing as the "true self?" Are psychology and the Buddha's philosophy talking about entirely different things?

In psychology, the "true self" implies that there is a self to be true. Accepting that the Buddha's teachings of no-self are true, then how can there be an "authentic" self? Psychology states that the "authentic self" or "authenticity" refers to the degree to which an individual's actions, beliefs, and values align with their true self. But, science itself has proven that there is no "self" to be found in the brain. Conversely then, on what basis can psychology claim that there is such a thing as an "authentic self?"

Firstly, let's address this idea of a 'true self.' In psychology, it's a cornerstone concept, positing that deep within each of us lies an authentic core—a set of unshakable traits, beliefs, and values that define our individuality. It's as if each person is a novel, with a consistent narrative thread running through it, irrespective of the external chapters imposed upon them by society, culture, or circumstance. This authenticity, then, from the perspective of psychology, is the extent to which we express and live in accordance with this internal narrative.

Now, turn to the Buddha's doctrine of Anatta. It throws a rather profound wrench into these psychological workings by simply denying the existence of this so-called 'true self.' It argues that what we perceive as the self is but a fleeting, ever-changing conglomeration of thoughts, experiences, and sensations. There's no fixed essence to be true to; it's like trying to grasp a river and claim that it's unchanging.

So, how do we reconcile these? If psychology insists on a 'true self' at the core of authenticity, and Buddhism asserts there's no such thing, are we at an impasse? Not necessarily. The key lies in understanding the fundamental differences in their approaches.

Psychology, particularly Western psychology, seeks to empower the individual, providing them with a framework to understand and better themselves within a societal context. It's similar to giving someone a compass and a map in a vast, uncharted landscape. The 'true self' is a concept around which individuals can orient their personal development and mental health.

Buddha's teachings, on the other hand, are less about empowerment and more about mental awakening, away from a state of ignorance - a gradual realization of the nature of existence. Here, the self is not a fixed entity but a part of a larger, interdependent process. This perspective is less about navigating a landscape and more about understanding that the landscape itself is in a constant state of flux.

Regarding the scientific assertion that there is no 'self' to be found in the brain, it's a fascinating point. Neuroscience shows us that the brain is a complex, dynamic organ, constantly rewiring and reconfiguring itself. Does this support the Buddha's view of an ever-changing self? Perhaps. But, it also doesn't necessarily negate the psychological concept of a 'true self.' The brain's complexity allows for consistent patterns of behavior and thought, which can be seen as the bedrock of one's personality or 'true self.'

In essence, while psychology and Buddhism may seem at odds over the concept of the self, they are, in many ways, simply different lenses through which to view the human condition. Psychology provides a framework for understanding and improving oneself within the context of a stable identity, while Buddhism offers a path to understanding the transient nature of existence, including the self.

So, is there an 'authentic self'? To begin, we must acknowledge that the notion of an 'authentic self' is not merely a psychological curiosity but an existential conundrum. Psychology, with its insatiable appetite for categorization, affirms the existence of such a self. However, juxtapose this with the teachings of the Buddha, and the question metamorphoses into an existential paradox. Herein lies the exquisite beauty of intellectual diversity; each perspective offers a distinct lens to view the grand tapestry of human existence.

Now, consider the Buddha's teaching. With his penetrating insight, declared that suffering is the unwelcome companion of every mortal, birthed by their own cravings and actions. This leads us to a rather intriguing inquiry: Can one be considered 'authentic' if they are oblivious to the roots of their own suffering? The answer, paradoxically, is yes. Yet, this authenticity is not a badge of honor, for it is born not of enlightenment but of ignorance. True authenticity, as per the Buddha, emerges when one is acutely aware and mindful of the sources of their suffering,

enabling them to make rational choices to alleviate this existential malaise.

Psychologically speaking, the 'authentic self' is a construct representing the alignment of one's actions, beliefs, and values with their intrinsic nature. However, the Buddha's teachings on suffering suggest that every individual 'authentically' endures the repercussions of their own desires and cravings. If one remains ignorant of the root of their suffering, their authenticity, in a perverse twist, aligns with their 'true self' in its most unenlightened form.

This brings us to the ultimate irony. The 'true self,' as universally experienced by humankind, is, in fact, the 'false self' - a profound paradox that the Buddha sought to unravel. The philosophical musings of psychology and Buddhism converge here, suggesting that the 'false self' and 'true self' are not just psychological concepts but existential realities. The Buddha's teachings serve to crystallize these concepts, rendering them more tangible and, consequently, more amenable to transformation.

In this grand discourse, we are reminded that the journey towards self-awareness is fraught with paradoxes and ironies, yet it is a journey worth undertaking. For in understanding the dichotomies of the 'true' and 'false' selves, we edge closer to the elusive truth of our existence.

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### *The True Self & the False Self*

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The concepts of the "true self" and the "false self" in psychology are quite intriguing and reflect on how individuals perceive and present themselves to the world.

According to psychology, the "true self" refers to the most authentic, genuine version of a person. This encompasses a person's true feelings, desires, and values, unaltered by external influences. True-self is about being sincere and honest with oneself, embracing

both strengths and weaknesses, and is often associated with a sense of personal integrity, congruence, and psychological wellbeing.

On the other hand, the "false self," according to psychology, is a façade or persona that an individual projects to conform to societal expectations or to protect themselves from emotional harm. Donald Winnicott, a prominent British psychoanalyst, first introduced the concepts of the "false self" and "true self" in his work. These ideas were most prominently featured in his book *"The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment,"*<sup>11</sup> published in 1965.

The false self is essentially a defensive mask, hiding the true self, and often emerges from a place of fear, insecurity, or the need for approval. False-self is characterized by behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that are not genuinely felt by the individual, but are put-on or displayed to fit into certain roles or meet the expectations of others.

These concepts are central in understanding human behavior and mental health. A significant discrepancy between the true self and the false self can lead to emotional distress and a sense of inauthenticity, such as feeling like a fake or faking their way through life, which inevitably impacts a person's psychological well-being. Therapy and personal introspection often aim to bridge the gap between these selves, fostering a more authentic and fulfilling life experience.

Another phrase is used interchangeably in an attempt to further define the concepts of the true self and false self. "Authentic self" and in-authentic self" are the two other phrases. However, none of these phrases quite pinpoints the basic nature of a human being like the phrase "intrinsic self" used to define core human nature; a nature that is devoid of ignorance about the nature of reality.

Now, to delve deeper into this discussion, I could single out Winnicott's views about the "true" and "false" self, or select from the plethora of other researchers in psychology, but I find one perspective in particular that hits to the heart of the concept of the "true" and

“false” self, which is that of the renowned German psychiatrist, Alice Miller. My reason for choosing Miller is that her examination of this subject begins from the moment a child’s true or intrinsic self becomes altered or defiled. It is universally accepted by psychologists that the alteration or damage, if you will, of the true-self, from the earliest years of childhood, tend to remain with an individual for their entire lives.

Of all of Alice Miller’s works, it is her first publication, titled, *"Prisoners of Childhood,"*<sup>12</sup> also known as *"The Drama of the Gifted Child,"* that offers a profound exploration of the concepts of the "true self" and the "false self." Her perspective on these subjects is deeply rooted in the context of child development and the impact of parental expectations and behaviors.

In Miller’s framework, the "true self" is an individual’s authentic self (intrinsic self), consisting of unadulterated genuine human feelings, desires, and needs. This true self is characterized by spontaneity, creativity, and emotional honesty. It represents the core of what a person is, untainted by external pressures or demands. The true self is often suppressed or hidden in individuals who have experienced emotional neglect or abuse in childhood.

The "false self," according to Miller, develops as a defensive mechanism. It arises in response to an environment where the true self is not valued or recognized, particularly by primary caregivers. Children who grow up with emotionally distant, narcissistic, or demanding parents, often learn to adapt by developing a false self. This false self is a façade that conforms to parental or caregiver expectations and societal norms, often at the cost of the child’s intrinsic emotions and desires. The child learns to hide their true self; their intrinsic nature, and presents what they believe is expected of them to gain love, attention, or simply to avoid punishment. It could rightfully be said that it is from fear that the false self develops.

Miller argues that this dynamic leads to a loss of the individual’s true identity (intrinsic

identity) and results in varying degrees of psychological, emotional, and deep-seated issues in adulthood, including depression, a sense of emptiness, the sense of feeling like a fake, and difficulties in forming authentic relationships. According to Miller, the journey to recovering one’s true self involves recognizing and working through these childhood traumas and repressions, often with the help of therapy or psychoanalysis.

I found her work to be pivotal in understanding how childhood experiences shape adult personality and mental health, emphasizing the critical need for acknowledging and nurturing the true self from early childhood. Miller’s insights have had a lasting impact on the fields of psychology and psychotherapy, particularly in the understanding of the long-term effects of emotional abuse and neglect.

This discussion creates within me the question: Taking into consideration Miller’s explanations and descriptions of how the "true-self" is separated from an individual during childhood, does this not support the notion, as put forth by the Buddha, that the separation of the true-self, is caused by the introduction of things that cause suffering, such as craving and desire? In the case of Miller’s childhood example, a bruise, if you will, is created that causes the child to deeply crave and desire something that they cannot describe or explain. This deep craving or desire is fed by the sense that something is missing. Some people have described this as feeling like there is a big hole inside of them.

### **Perspective from the Buddha’s Teachings**

In the often-turbulent ocean of human consciousness, the philosophy of Alice Miller on the 'true self' and the 'false self,' in some respects, dovetails intriguingly with the teachings of the Buddha on suffering, craving, and desire. Permit me to navigate these philosophical waters, to unravel this intricate tapestry of thought.

Consider, if you will, Miller's poignant revelations about the 'true self' being eclipsed during childhood. This suppression, often a response to the needs and neuroses of parents, are the conditions that cause problems later in life. The effect of this condition, the subsequent causes of suffering, in the form of emotional and mental stress, is exactly the root cause of human suffering that the Buddha taught about.

This condition, cause and effect, aligns curiously with the Buddha's assertion that suffering springs from craving and desire. These two streams of thought, seemingly disparate, converge upon a shared delta: the notion that our *intrinsic* nature is often obfuscated by external influences – whether they be parental expectations in Miller's psychoanalytic view, or the desires and attachments highlighted in the Buddha's teachings.

In this context, the 'false self' that Miller describes – a construct erected to appease others and secure affection or avoid conflict – is not unlike the Buddha's depiction of a life ensnared by craving. Both perspectives suggest that our authentic selves are shrouded, if not outright lost, amidst the tumult of external demands and internal yearnings; leading to the state of being ignorant about one's intrinsic nature.

Yet, there is a subtle divergence in their diagnoses of the human condition. Miller's approach, deeply entrenched in the psychodynamic tradition, implies a certain pathos rooted in childhood trauma and emotional neglect. The Buddha, on the other hand, offers a more universal prescription, positing that suffering is an inevitable facet of existence, stemming from the very nature of human desire and attachment.

Expanding this scope, one might argue that both perspectives offer a kind of liberation philosophy for the psyche. Miller advocates for a therapeutic pilgrimage back to one's 'true self' – a journey through the labyrinth of the past to reclaim what was lost or hidden. The Buddha, meanwhile, prescribes a path of mindfulness

and detachment from external emotional irritants, and a relinquishing of desire in order to transcend suffering.

In the end, these philosophies – one emerging from the couch of psychoanalysis, the other seated under the Bodhi tree – serve as dual beacons, illuminating the complex interplay between our inner selves and the external world. They beckon us to understand that the quest for the 'true self,' whether mired in childhood trauma or entangled in the web of desire and craving, is both a deeply personal and profoundly universal endeavor.

Thus, in contemplating the research of Miller and the teaching of the Buddha, we are not merely engaging in academic exercise. Rather, we are embarking on a profound journey of self-discovery, seeking to unravel the mysteries of our own existence, to understand the forces that shape our thoughts, our feelings, and our very being. In this quest, we find not just knowledge, but perhaps, a path to our own liberation.

To expand on this, "Miller advocates for a therapeutic pilgrimage back to one's 'true self' – a journey through the labyrinth of the past to reclaim what was lost or hidden." The Buddha, meanwhile, prescribes a path of mindfulness and detachment, a relinquishing of desire to transcend suffering." What do both of these methods have in common? One method requires another individual, namely a psychologist or other mental health professional, while the Buddha claims that the individual themselves is perfectly capable of understanding their own suffering, and in doing so is able to transcend it.

Where Alice Miller and the Buddha play their respective parts, one discerns a shared theme beneath their differing methodologies: the quest for self-awareness and the transcendence of suffering. Allow me to dissect this fascinating juxtaposition.

Miller's approach, like many psychotherapies, is deeply rooted in the psychoanalytic tradition, which calls for a kind of archaeological dig into the self. It is a journey guided by a therapist, where one

excavates long-buried emotional traumas from the depths of childhood. This therapeutic odyssey, while necessitating the intervention of another – a mental health professional – is fundamentally about self-discovery. The therapist is similar to a guide, illuminating the path, but the journey itself, the reclamation of the 'true self,' is a profoundly personal endeavor.

In contrast, the Buddha's path – a voyage of mindfulness and detachment – is a solitary pilgrimage. It does not require the accompaniment of a guide in the form of a therapist. The Buddha teaches that you are the guide, you are the therapist, and you are perfectly qualified. Your therapy demands rigorous self-examination, a kind of introspection where one becomes both the seeker and the guide. The Buddha's prescription is to understand and then relinquish craving, to observe the workings of one's own mind and thereby transcend suffering. It is an inward journey, where the individual, armed with mindfulness and meditation, confronts and unravels the intricate web of cravings and attachments to them that cause suffering.

Yet, despite these methodological differences, both paths converge on a crucial point: *the importance of self-awareness*. Whether through the therapeutic process or through mindfulness and meditation, both Miller and the Buddha advocate for a deep, introspective understanding of oneself. Both recognize that suffering, in its myriad forms, is often a result of a disconnection from one's intrinsic and thus true nature.

Furthermore, both approaches entail a confrontation with discomfort – be it the painful memories of childhood traumas or the unsettling realizations of one's own cravings and attachments. This confrontation is essential to the process of healing and growth, to emerge from the chrysalis of suffering into a state of greater self-awareness and peace.

In essence, while the paths outlined by Miller and the Buddha may differ in their reliance on external guidance versus self-

guidance, they are united in their end goal: the liberation from suffering through a profound understanding of one's intrinsic nature. It is a journey that, irrespective of the route taken, leads one towards the same destination – a deeper, more authentic existence, free from the shackles of unexamined pain and unfulfilled desire.

Thus, in contemplating these two approaches, one appreciates that the journey towards self-awareness, towards healing and understanding, can take many forms. Whether guided by the hand of a therapist or navigated alone through mindful introspection, the journey is, at its core, about reclaiming the essence of one's intrinsic nature and finding peace in one's life.

In this discussion we find that the threads of psychology and the philosophy of the Buddha interweave, one discerns a profound truth: the distortion or suppression of one's intrinsic nature, the 'true self,' lays the groundwork for suffering in later life. Alice Miller, with her keen psychoanalytic insight, and the Buddha, with his deep wisdom, both illuminate this path to suffering, albeit from divergent vantage points.

Miller's psychoanalytic narrative compellingly argues that the damage inflicted upon the 'true self' during childhood – through neglect, emotional or physical abuse, – are the conditions that cause the seeds of suffering to sprout. This suffering manifests as psychological distress, a sense of emptiness, a sense of inauthenticity, or a perpetual struggle with one's identity. The child, adapting to their environment, constructs a 'false self' – a facade designed to appease and survive in a world that has failed to nurture their intrinsic nature. This betrayal of the intrinsic nature, though often a survival mechanism, becomes a source of profound inner conflict and unhappiness in later life.

Returning now to consider the teachings of the Buddha: He posits that suffering is inherent to life, but its intensity and persistence are often exacerbated by our cravings, attachments, and ignorance – craving not just

for material possessions, but for certain states of being, like satisfaction with one's life, for recognition, for love. This craving, in many ways, is born out of a disconnection from one's intrinsic nature. When one's intrinsic nature becomes overshadowed by societal expectations, personal ambitions, or the pursuit of pleasure, suffering becomes inevitable. Why? Because, as the Buddha taught, everything is impermanent. We may achieve our desires, we may get our way, and experience momentary happiness and contentment, but suffering will follow when we lose the things we have achieved.

Taking a poignant example from my own life. Many years ago, I had achieved a life that is hailed as successful and desired by many. Money was of no concern as there was plenty of it. My status as the CEO of a corporation, elevated me among the elite of society. The outward expression of my "self-image" could be seen in every aspect of my life. I was wholly and completely ensconced in a truly false perception of what and who I believed myself to be. I took for granted my good fortune. How do I know this? I didn't know it at the time, but later, when the financial debacle that began in 2008, laid waste to this façade, I realized that I had unwittingly created a mental bubble - a bubble that proved to have thin skin and burst violently. I was living a mental creation completely devoid of my intrinsic nature. Fortune had hijacked my intrinsic nature. I am thankful for the financial debacle of 2008. Did I learn that everything, no matter how solid or true it might appear to be, is impermanent? You betcha I did.

Both the psychoanalytical and the perspectives of the Buddha, though rooted in different traditions, converge on a crucial point: *the alienation from one's intrinsic nature is a fertile ground for suffering*. In Miller's framework, this alienation is a result of external forces shaping a child's development. In the Buddha's philosophy, it is the internal clinging and craving that distances one from their intrinsic human nature.

The intermingling of these ideas presents a compelling narrative. The damage to the true self in childhood, as Miller elucidates, sets up a lifelong struggle with authenticity and fulfillment. The Buddha's path of mindfulness and detachment from craving offers a way to reconcile with the lost intrinsic nature. By becoming aware of our desires and attachments, by observing the mind and its machinations, we gradually peel back the layers that obscure our intrinsic nature.

In essence, the journey towards healing, towards alleviating suffering, involves a dual process: unraveling the damage inflicted upon the true self (as Miller describes) and transcending the cravings and attachments that perpetuate suffering (as the Buddha teaches). It's a journey of returning to one's essence, one's beginning, of rediscovering and embracing the authenticity that was lost or buried under the detritus of life's experiences.

Thus, in contemplating these two perspectives, we see how the neglect or distortion of the true self in childhood not only seeds future suffering but also how the path to healing and liberation lies in reconciling with, and understanding, our intrinsic nature. The journey is arduous, fraught with introspection and the unearthing of long-buried truths, but it is a journey that leads to the heart of what it means to be truly human – to live a life of authenticity, awareness, and, ultimately, peace.

Throughout this discussion we have encountered the phrase “intrinsic nature.” This concept aligns comfortably with the teachings of the Buddha. There is a very distinct difference between the Buddha's concept of “intrinsic nature” and psychology's meaning of “authentic-self” or “true-self.”

In this philosophical and psychological discourse, terms often meander through various shades of meaning, the juxtaposition of the Buddha's 'intrinsic nature' with the psychological concept of the 'authentic-self' or 'true-self' presents a fascinating study.

The 'intrinsic nature,' as expounded by the Buddha, is a concept deeply rooted in Eastern philosophy. It refers to the fundamental,

unchanging essence of a being, unmarred by external influences or internal delusions. This intrinsic nature is not merely a collection of personality traits or desires but a deeper, more profound sense of one's intrinsic nature that transcends the ego and its attachments. It speaks to a state of being that is in harmony with the true order of things, a nature that, when realized, leads to a cessation of suffering and the attainment of peace. In this context, the intrinsic nature is less about individual identity and more about a universal essence shared by all humans.

### Contrasting Philosophies

Contrast the Buddha's philosophy with the Western psychological construct of the 'authentic self' or 'true self.' Here, the Western terms often denote an individual's most genuine, unfiltered personality and desires, free from societal conditioning and external expectations. The 'authentic self' is about personal truth – the aspects of one's character that are most deeply felt and sincerely held. It is this authentic self that Alice Miller suggests is damaged or hidden in response to childhood experiences, leading to emotional distress and a false self facade.

Now, to weave these threads together, one might say that while both concepts aim to unearth a fundamental aspect of the self, they operate on different planes. The psychological 'authentic self' is more individualistic, concerned with personal identity and emotional integrity. It is a "self" defined in relation to personal history, emotions, and desires. The Buddha's 'intrinsic nature,' however, is a more universal and personal concept, pointing to a deeper, more essential aspect of being that transcends the individual ego.

In this light, the journey towards discovering one's authentic self in psychology is a process of introspection and healing, aimed at reconciling with one's personal history and emotional truths. In contrast, the realization of one's intrinsic nature, according to the Buddha,

is a highly personal awakening, a process of transcending the ego and its attachments to understand a deeper, more universal truth.

Thus, while the terms 'intrinsic nature' and "true self" might be used interchangeably in casual discourse, their philosophical roots and implications are distinct. One speaks to a psychological journey of emotional healing and self-discovery, while the other points to a personal path of mental awakening, the removing of one's own ignorance about their intrinsic nature, and universal understanding. Both journeys, however intricate and divergent, lead to a deeper understanding of the self, but they traverse different landscapes of the human experience.

The distinction between the psychological concept of the "true self" and the Buddha's notion of "intrinsic nature" is indeed profound, reflecting a fundamental difference in the Western psychological and Eastern philosophical understandings of self and identity.

In Western psychology, particularly in the realms of psychoanalysis and humanistic psychology, the "true self" is a concept that refers to the most authentic, core aspect of an individual. This includes one's genuine feelings, desires, and thoughts, which are considered to be the essence of who a person truly is. This concept suggests that beneath the layers of social conditioning, defensive mechanisms, and adaptive personas (or "false selves"), there exists a core, authentic self.

The Buddha's, particularly within the context of Anatta (no-self), propose a fundamentally different understanding. The Buddha posited that what we consider to be the self is not a permanent, unchanging entity. Instead, the self is seen as an illusion, a construct made up of temporary aggregates (form, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness). *The concept of intrinsic nature in Buddhism is not about finding a true, authentic self within; it is about realizing the impermanent and interconnected nature of all things, including what we call the self.* This realization leads to liberation from suffering, as it transcends the

egoistic view and attachment to a fixed sense of self.

While Western psychology's "true self" is about uncovering and connecting to an authentic, core identity, Buddha's teaching focuses on one's "intrinsic nature;" about understanding the nonexistence of a permanent, independent self. The psychological journey is inward, seeking self-discovery and actualization, whereas the Buddhist journey is about transcending the notion of self altogether, leading to a deeper understanding of the nature of reality, the identification of the sources of one's suffering, in order to extinguish one's suffering. These differing views represent the diverse ways in which Eastern and Western philosophies approach the concept of self and identity, each offering unique insights into the human condition.

Within the often-contentious dialogue between Eastern philosophical wisdom and Western psychological thought, the concept of the 'true self' stands as a subject of profound debate and introspection. Permit me to dissect this intriguing juxtaposition between the Buddha's concept of 'intrinsic nature' and psychology's pursuit of the 'true self.'

### **Contradictions between East & West**

As we have discussed, the psychological quest for the 'true self,' deeply ingrained in Western thought, posits that within each individual lies an authentic core – a bastion of unalterable traits, beliefs, and values that define one's individuality. This search for the 'true self' is like an archaeological dig, seeking to unearth the bedrock of one's intrinsic nature beneath layers of societal conditioning and personal experience.

However, this endeavor, noble as it may seem, is fraught with complexity and contradiction. *How can one claim to discover this 'true self' if one lacks the tools or understanding to examine the roots of their beliefs, behaviors, and the very suffering these engender?* The pursuit of the 'true

self' risks becoming a Sisyphean task, forever chasing an elusive and perhaps illusory ideal.

Now, contrast this with the Buddha's teachings on 'intrinsic nature.' In this view, the concept of a permanent, unchanging self is a fallacy – an illusion maintained by the ephemeral confluence of form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. *The Buddha's path is not one of self-discovery in the psychological sense, but rather of self-transcendence.* It is a journey towards understanding the impermanent, interdependent nature of one's own existence, and in doing so, freeing oneself from the chains of suffering and delusions caused by ignorance.

In this context, the Buddha's approach seems more adept at addressing the human conditions, causes and effects of suffering. It does not entangle itself in the quagmire of defining an authentic 'self.' Instead, it offers a pragmatic path: mindfulness, detachment, and the understanding of the non-self. This approach addresses the root of suffering – not by seeking an authentic self within, but by dissolving the very notion of a permanent self. It is a path that acknowledges the fluid, transient nature of our existence, and in doing so, offers a more direct route to peace and understanding.

Moreover, the Buddha's teachings provide a practical framework for examining what makes us tick, and personal growth. By cultivating mindfulness and awareness, individuals can observe their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors without attachment or judgment. This process fosters a deeper understanding of the causes of suffering and paves the way for transformation and freedom.

To wrap up this discussion, while the psychological quest for the 'true self' is a noble endeavor, it appears somewhat limited in its capacity to grapple with the complexities of the human psyche. The Buddha's concept of 'intrinsic nature,' with its focus on the impermanence and interdependence of all phenomena, offers a more holistic and effective approach to understanding and resolving the fundamental issues of existence.

It is a path that transcends the search for an individualized self, leading instead to a profound realization of the interconnectedness of all life and the liberation from the cycle of conditions, causes and ultimate effect: suffering.

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*Who are you? Who am I?*

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When I personally confront the question, *'What is it that I feel or experience when I use the word "I," or "myself"?' I find my thinking meandering through a labyrinth of philosophical, and subjective challenges. It's a question that, I suspect, leaves many at a loss for words. Why is this so? Because, the core essence of who you are, who I am, who any of us are, is the most profound mystery in all the Universe.*

We, especially in Western culture, are ensnared by the notion that the 'self' is the cornerstone of existence. This is partially due to the long-held religious tradition of the existence of a soul. Like the soul, we cling to the belief that this 'self' is our being, embodies our being, and indeed, is the very definition of 'me.' But let's be brutally honest here: this is a fallacy.

The reality, as I see it, is that our being, whatever you or I might think "self" to be, is far from a self-contained, self-existent monolith set in stone. Every iota of what you believe you are is the offspring of a relentless process of becoming. What you are at this very moment is not a fixed point but the culmination of a journey - an evolving journey; a journey where "becoming" is infinite - we are always becoming something.

You see, humans are processes in motion, not statues chiseled in perpetuity. Our existence, the space our bodies occupy, and, yes, even our current state of mind—whether soaked in contentment or writhing in discontent—are the offspring of this ceaseless process. This process is a tapestry woven from how we perceive forms, patterns, and the

world around us. Our conceptions of who and what we are, are but a self-fashioned sculpture, one to which we have willingly, or perhaps unwittingly, surrendered to an illusory identity. Very few people are actually able to know from where or when this identity originates.

So, as I pontificate on this matter, I am compelled to challenge the entrenched Western ideals of a static, independent self in the same manner as did the Buddha did, those many thousands of years ago. Our identities are not bastions of isolation; they are rivers fed by myriad streams of experiences, interactions, and perceptions. To assume otherwise is to fall prey to a grand illusion—a mirage of the self that dances on the edges of our collective consciousness.

This discussion invites us to embark on a, perhaps, Socratic-like quest, one that questions the very essence of what we call the 'self.' As I often advocate, let's not shy away from turning the mirror onto ourselves, examining the reflections with a skeptic's eye.

As has been discussed throughout this paper, the mental and emotional image of ourselves, this so-called 'self,' is not a fixed entity, not an immutable core as we so often lazily assume. Without evidence to the contrary, we accept this image of 'self'—a concoction of our minds, a narrative we've spun from threads of experiences, interactions, and societal expectations. But, if I am to stand here, well, sit actually, and declare that I am not merely this image, this portrait painted by myself and others, then who, pray tell, am I?

The Buddha posited that there exists a way of living devoid of dissatisfaction and suffering, an intrinsic path, so to speak. It's a fascinating proposition: the singular human experience, the degree to which we suffer or find ourselves dissatisfied, is a measure of how far we have strayed from our intrinsic nature. The more we wallow in dissatisfaction, the more we find ourselves dancing to the tune of a false 'self,' this persona crafted by our misinterpretations and misperceptions.

Consider the average human being, living within the boundaries of such a mental construct—a self-concept largely shaped by others. From the cradle, our parents, those initial scriptwriters, begin to define us. With each new encounter, each change in scenery, this concept of 'self' evolves. We settle into an identity, a character in a play of our own making, influenced by these external directors and script writers.

This self-image, whether we deem it good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, is a mosaic of these influences. Consider the moments when you're asked to describe your strengths and weaknesses—what are you doing but presenting a summary of this self-concept.

But here's the rub: knowing that an aspect of our lives is detrimental doesn't always spur us to rewrite our script - removing the unpleasant parts. We become actors, adhering to lines that may not reflect our intrinsic nature.

Education, career, societal roles—these too mold our self-concept. A doctor, a lawyer, a monk, a YouTuber—each carries a distinct image, a script they conform to. It's rare, indeed, for these conceptual images to overlap, to stray from the expected narrative - the expected script. Script writers add certain personality characteristics to the players. These personality characteristics define the players actions, decisions, intent, and so on. This is no different than the script that you follow. What if you didn't follow the script, but ad-libbed everything? "Oh, but I couldn't do that!" Maybe you think that to do so would cause those closest to you to wonder whether or not you had lost your mind.

Our self-image is the script from which we act out our lives. In this respect, we are not acting or thinking according to our intrinsic nature. But how do we gauge if we're living authentically, true to our intrinsic nature? It boils down to our level of dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and suffering. The greater these feelings, the more likely we are acting in a play that's not our own, living a life divergent from our intrinsic human nature.

So, I pose this question: *Are we merely characters in a grand narrative authored by society, culture, and circumstance, or are we the author of our story, capable of breaking free from these prescribed roles to discover our true, intrinsic nature?* The answer lies not in the stars, not in psychology, not in intellectual debate, but within your own person. This is just one of the profound things that the Buddha discovered. The answers were only to be found within himself - his own intrinsic nature that is sometimes referred to as the Buddha nature. Since the word Buddha means "awakened one," Buddha nature literally means that intrinsic nature is one where the person is awake - free from ignorance developed by counterfeit scripts that we think is "me."

The concept of Buddha-nature is found in one of the major Mahayana sutras, known as the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, which was written some three-centuries after the Buddhas death. It is also known for its doctrine that all beings have the potential for awakening, a fundamental aspect of the Mahayana Buddha-nature teaching. The topic Buddha-nature is not found in the original texts of the Pali Canon that recorded the original teachings of the Buddha.

Buddha-nature is addressed in various passages throughout the Mahaparinirvana Sutra. One of the most notable sections is where the Buddha declares that all beings possess a Buddha-nature. This is a radical departure from his early original teachings, which focused more on the practices and disciplines required for achieving awakening, rather than the inherent potential for such awakening or as it is commonly called, enlightenment.

In this sutra, the Buddha-nature is often discussed in the context of its being obscured or hidden by defilements and negative karma. The text emphasizes that despite these obscurations, the Buddha-nature remains undamaged and can be revealed through the practice of the Dharma. The Mahaparinirvana Sutra uses various metaphors and analogies to describe this, such as the idea of a golden

Buddha statue being covered and obscured by a layer of mud.

The Mahaparinirvana Sutra's teachings on Buddha-nature were highly influential in the development of Mahayana Buddhist thought, particularly in East Asia. They provided a doctrinal foundation for the universal potential for awakening and the inherently pure nature of all sentient beings, which became key tenets in Mahayana Buddhism.

It's also worth noting that the Mahaparinirvana Sutra exists in several versions and translations, with the Chinese and Tibetan versions being the most well-known. These different versions contain variations in how the concept of Buddha-nature is presented and discussed. The point is that there is an obvious correlation between "intrinsic nature" and Buddha-nature.

One of the most profound things we can ever know about our life - our being, is that we do not need to learn "how" to be authentic or true to our intrinsic nature. Our intrinsic nature has always been with us all long.

### The Realization - The Uncovering

If you are not familiar with the 1939 movie, "The Wizard of Oz," there is a scene where Dorothy experiences a mental awakening. The exact dialogue between Dorothy and Glinda the Good Witch of the North, regarding Dorothy's ability to return home, occurs towards the end of the film. It goes as follows:

**Glinda:** "You don't need to be helped any longer. You've always had the power to go back to Kansas."

**Dorothy:** "I have?"

**Scarecrow:** "Then why didn't you tell her before?"

**Glinda:** "Because she wouldn't have believed me. She had to learn it for herself."

This conversation is a pivotal moment in the movie, symbolizing Dorothy's personal growth and the realization that the power to achieve her desires was within her all along. It's

a classic moment of self-discovery and empowerment, central to the film's theme. This dialog is the same kind of thinking that you need to generate in order to understand that you need to learn the lesson for yourself. You are the one responsible for uncovering and revealing your intrinsic nature.

You might want to counter this argument by declaring that you believe you are living according to your true-self, your intrinsic nature. You consider your life to be good. You don't suffer any more than any other individual. And this might indeed be true. Let's say, for the sake of this argument, that you experience peace of mind. From where does that peace of mind originate? In the movie *Peaceful Warrior*, the main character, Dan, thinks his life is just peachy. After Socrates asks Dan, "Are you happy?" Dan replies with his own question, "What does happiness have to do with anything?" Socrates replies, "Everything."

Dan tells Socrates, *"My dad's got plenty of cash, school's kind of a breeze, I get straight A's. I got great friends, I'm in great shape, and I only sleep alone when I absolutely want to."* This quote reflects Dan's perception of his life and the underlying questions about true happiness and fulfillment.

As the movie progresses it becomes clear that Dan is basing his entire concept of happiness on his momentary quality of life, which of course includes his youth, intelligence and physical good appearance. Dan's present situation leads to his vision of a similar future as a gold medal Olympic gymnast. Socrates asks Dan a thought-stopping question - one that Dan had never considered before. *"Last question. If you don't make the Olympic team, what will you do?"* Dan's superficial markers of success – familial wealth, academic ease, and physical prowess – are ephemeral, transient elements that falsely prop up his sense of well-being. They are not the bedrock of genuine peace of mind or happiness but mere illusory comforts.

From where does your peace of mind originate? Is it hope of a better future fed by your education? Is it security founded on

family wealth? Does your peace of mind stem from your job? Maybe your peace of mind originates with your regular meditation or attendance at meditation meetings or talks given by a monk or a nun. You see, whether your current mental status or mindset originates with money, education, or your local sangha or meditation, these are all external things that we use to create the illusion of peace of mind. We unwittingly cling to these external things. While they most certainly do affect our state of mind, the conveniences we have in living day-to-day, they are all a part of the illusion.

"Now wait just a minute! Are you saying meditation is bad?" Where does true peace of mind originate? Is it nestled in the hopeful aspirations for a glittering future, rooted in the stability of family wealth, or found in the solace of a job? Can it be discovered in the disciplined practice of meditation or the communal serenity of a sangha? These elements, while influential, are external. They are but the scenery and props on the stage of life, not the essence of the play itself.

Now, to anticipate a possible objection – am I decrying meditation or the pursuit of education, wealth, or a fulfilling career as inherently flawed? Certainly not. It is the lens through which we view these pursuits that is pivotal. The moment meditation, for instance, is reduced to a mere tool for self-aggrandizement or a superficial badge of spirituality, its transformative potential is squandered. It becomes similar to a drug, offering a temporary high but no lasting fulfillment.

In essence, the pursuit of authenticity is not about the acquisition of external attributes or accomplishments, as the character Dan discovers. It's an inward journey, a peeling back of the layers of illusion and pretense to reveal the core of our being - the intrinsic nature. It is in this introspective excavation that we find the bedrock of true peace of mind – not in the transient and often deceptive external world, but in the uncharted depths of our own selves.

So, as we navigate the vicissitudes of life, let us remember that the quest for authenticity is an internal odyssey, a pilgrimage to the heart of our being. It's a journey that demands courage, honesty, and a relentless questioning of the facile answers provided by the world. In the end, it's not about learning how to be authentic, but about unlearning the artifice that shrouds our intrinsic nature.

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### *Who is the Intrinsic You?*

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After reading this article do you have a better understanding of the questions: What are you? What time is it? Where are you? If this article has successfully captured your mind and re-oriented your train of thought, then perhaps you now can understand why the answer to the first question: "What are you?" is "This moment." The second question: "What time is it?" you now understand why the answer is, "Now." The third question: "Where are you?" holds a new meaning because,



This existential inquiry, "*Who is the intrinsic you?*" provokes a profound reckoning with the essence of our being. It's a question that strips away the veneer of external affiliations and material attachments, exposing your raw, unvarnished intrinsic nature hidden by life's accumulated refuse.

Who indeed are you, when stripped of the trappings of your social roles and material possessions? What remains when the structures and supports that you've leaned on crumble away? Imagine, if your law firm

dissolves, your financial reservoirs can no longer the lifestyle to which you have become accustomed, or your yoga classes and meditation circles disappear. Do these losses diminish your core, or do they merely strip away the superfluous layers, revealing your true intrinsic nature?

The truth, as I see it, is that all these attachments, all these external elements we cling to, are mere adornments, ephemeral and transient. They are not the essence of our being, but rather distractions, often gaudy and superficial, that cloud our perception of our intrinsic nature. This holds equally true for the negative attachments we harbor. The sense of a cruel fate or unending misery is not an intrinsic part of our nature, but a mold growing in the fertile soil of a mind misled into believing that suffering and despair are all that exist.

But therein lies the beacon of hope, the exhilarating possibility that just as the Buddha discovered his true intrinsic nature, so can we all. It's a matter of reorienting our thoughts, reshaping our perspectives, and daring to be different. The intrinsic you is not a distant, unattainable ideal; it's a latent reality, obscured but not obliterated by the debris of life's experiences and societal expectations.

The challenge, therefore, is to push aside the accumulated garbage that hides your intrinsic nature. It is not an easy task; it demands the courage to confront and discard the comfortable illusions we've surrounded ourselves with. But the reward is the revelation of your beautiful intrinsic nature, untainted and unspoiled.

So, as we conclude this exploration, let us embrace the exhilarating journey towards our intrinsic nature. It's a path fraught with challenges, but rich in rewards. In stripping away the non-essential, we uncover the essence of our being, pure and unadulterated. The journey of this discovery is not just a path to inner peace; it's a rebellion against the superficial, a crusade for authenticity. In this pursuit, we find not just our intrinsic nature, but the unbridled joy of living a life unencumbered by false identities and hollow

attachments. Let us then, with unflagging zeal and unwavering determination embark on this noble quest to discover, truly and irrevocably, our intrinsic nature.

To restate this conclusion with a flourish, let us, in a Dickensian spirit of grand introspection, embark upon a wondrous journey, an inquiry as profound as it is poetic: 'Who, in the vast tapestry of existence, is the intrinsic you?' Imagine, as if through a Penrosian thought experiment, a world where the familiar constructs of your life dissipate like particles in quantum uncertainty. Your local sangha, a sanctuary of spiritual connection, vanishes. Your law firm, a bastion of good income, ceases to exist. Envision, with Alan Watts' Zen-like insight, your existence devoid of these anchors - your career, your financial stability, the physical and mental sanctuary found in yoga and meditation. How would this alter the fundamental frequencies of your inner being?

In this multidimensional narrative, the attachments and roles we cling to are similar to Dickens' societal decorations, mere illusions, much like the observable phenomena in physicist Roger Penrose's quantum universe that mask deeper truths. Similarly, the personal sorrows and challenges we face, the frustrations and despair, are not our intrinsic nature. They are transient, like clouds in Alan Watts' sky, or quantum fluctuations in physicist Fred Alan Wolf's cosmic dance, obscuring the eternal truths beneath.

Just as the ancient Buddha sought knowledge within himself and within the depths of his own mind, so too can you discover your intrinsic nature. This quest is a fusion of Dickens' Victorian exploration of human nature, Penrose's theoretical physics, Watts' Zen philosophy, and Wolf's quantum musings. To uncover your intrinsic nature, you must reorient your thoughts, shift your perspective. Think in the holistic terms of this combined wisdom. Your intrinsic nature, always present yet veiled by layers of perception and experience, is waiting to be rediscovered. It's a journey that transcends

time and space, an exploration of the self that embraces the mysteries of the cosmos and the ancient wisdom of the Buddha.

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